


MEET THE... MAYA

 During the Classical Period the number and size of states grew dramatically by imposing political unity where previously there had been none. But in the Americas, while state systems expanded in scope and reach, it was networks of city-states that flourished – like the Maya.

HIGHLIGHTS:

CLAIM TO FAME: PYRAMIDS, HUMAN SACRIFICE, & CALENDARS that were extremely accurate (except one's predicting the end of the world in 2012)

CHRONOLOGY: peaked 250 CE – 800

TERRITORY: Wet jungles of southern MEXICO

RELIGION: Animistic

The mother civilization of Mesoamerica, the Olmec, disappeared by about 100 BCE, but their earliest heirs were the Maya, who centered their society in the rainforests of present-day Guatemala, Belize, and southern Mexico. By the 4th century CE, the Maya built more than eighty large ceremonial centers in the lowlands, all with pyramids, palaces, and temples. These large centers were real cities with tens of thousands of people, but most of the populations were peasant villagers who lived in settlements on the periphery of the cities. To boost productivity in the poor jungle soils, the Maya built terraces that trapped silt carried by the rivers, which allowed for greater maize, cotton, and cacao harvests. The Mayan's best known advances, however, were their complex hieroglyphic writings and intricate calendar systems that recorded the ritual year, the solar year of 365 days, and the long-count.

Yet, Mayan culture lacked a single unifying government. Instead, the Mayan city-states shared a common culture with clearly delineated social classes and a pantheon of gods only appeased by rituals of human sacrifice. In Mayan society, rulers and other members of the elite served both priestly and political functions. They decorated their bodies with tattoos and wore elaborate costumes. Although kings were not believed to be divine, they communicated directly with supernatural beings and deceased ancestors through rituals. Religion was a focal point in Mayan life. The Maya believed that it was important to please the gods, who expected honor and reverence from their human subjects. So, highly respected priests, thought to have magical powers, conducted ceremonies sacrificing prisoners of war.

By about 800 CE, most Maya populations had begun to leave the cities, and within 100 years most of the cities had disappeared. No one knows for sure why the civilization declined, although many theories have been proposed. Some historians have proposed foreign invasion; others say civil war occurred; still others think that epidemic diseases and environmental problems decimated the cities.

